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ABSTRACT

The role of play in the learning and development of young children has long been recognized by researchers and early childhood educators. Although research indicates that play does provide a context that supports and facilitates literacy learning, most research has focused on preschool or kindergarten children. The purpose of this study was to investigate opportunities for literacy learning during play, in the researcher's first grade classroom. Data was collected by gathering child-produced text, through participant observation, and video-recordings of children during dramatic play sessions. Observations showed that children used reading and writing in meaningful ways during play. They applied various functions of print, practiced skills, and explored concepts that had been introduced in the formal curriculum. It appears that play is a context that encompasses many of the conditions necessary for literacy development and is a useful means of extending and supporting the formal literacy curriculum. (Contains 25 references and 3 tables of data.) (Author/RS)

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Literacy Learning through Play in a Primary Classroom

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Abstract

The role of play in the learning and development of young children has long been recognized by researchers and early childhood educators. Although research indicates that play does provide a context that supports and facilitates literacy learning, most research has focused on preschool or kindergarten children.

The purpose of this study was to investigate opportunities for literacy learning during play, in the researcher's first grade classroom. Data was collected by gathering child-produced text, through participant observation, and video-recordings of children during dramatic play sessions.

Observations showed that children used reading and writing in meaningful ways during play. They applied various functions of print, practiced skills, and explored concepts that had been introduced in the formal curriculum. It appears that play is a context that encompasses many of the conditions necessary for literacy development and is a useful means of extending and supporting the formal literacy curriculum.

Introduction

Learning to read and write is fundamental to schooling. The majority of school activities involve reading and writing. A joint position statement by the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (199) states that "It is essential and urgent to teach children to read and write competently, enabling them to achieve today's high standards of literacy" (p. 31).

Learning to read and write is fundamental to schooling. Because the majority of school activities involve reading and writing, students who are behind in literacy skills are automatically marginalized from other aspect of education, when reading the text is the primary means by which students access information. Students who are not proficient with print are prone to failure when student writing, and written tests are the predominant methods for assessing knowledge. The dominant use of print media for representing knowledge in schools is illustrated by the emphasis on standardized testing to compare and evaluate schools. Clearly, literacy proficiency is a major concern.

Learning to read and write is also a hot political topic. While everyone seems to agree that literacy is essential, debate continues as to the "best" method of teaching/learning to read and write. Expectations for learning to read and write are driving forces behind mandated curriculum; first grade students face significant pressure to learn to read.

The increasing emphasis on literacy in education has significant impact on the school lives of young children and their teachers. Knowledgeable teachers often experience tension between developmental theory and the expectation that all children will learn to read within a given time frame, using a rigid curricula. When early childhood teachers are aware of the impact that individual, developmental, and cultural differences have on the learning timetable, the challenge becomes one of providing experiences that are relevant to children even as the teacher strives to meet mandated standards.

Because many primary students experience difficulty acquiring literacy through various methods during formal instruction, and are so highly motivated to engage in social play, it is important to explore opportunities for students to connect with literacy as they eagerly engage in playful activities.

The results of numerous studies indicate that, under certain conditions, play does facilitate literacy acquisition (Branscombe, 1993; Christie, 1993; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Schrader, 1993). Reading and writing are activities that require the ability to think abstractly and interpret the meaning of visual symbols. The development of representational thought is facilitated by symbolic play, as children assimilate and accommodate new concepts (Berk, 1994; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978).

Other theorists advocate the implementation of programs in which concepts and skills are taught in context (Dyson, 1993; Goodman, 1986, 1993; Hall, 1995; Strickland, 1989; & Cambourne, 1998). Research by anthropologist Marian Dobbert, (1985) suggests that cognitive, physical, social, and emotional domains are integrated during play and polyphasic learning occurs. Thus, as children play, they are learning important skills and

concepts that are beneficial in many facets life and education. Furthermore, when adults support the efforts of children who engage with print, opportunities exist for instruction about strategies, concepts, and skills. Morrow and Rand, (1991) suggest that play provides opportunities for young children to practice and apply literacy abilities.

Dramatic play is a social arena in which children create realities based on the experiences of their lives. As such, children are able to create narrative contexts that include the language, culture, and literacies of home, school, and community. In their play they weave knowledge of home and school, of child and official curriculum to create a hybrid culture (Au, 1991). In this context, no child is a disadvantaged learner; each child brings valuable life experiences and expertise to contribute to the creation of a dynamic, shared reality.

Clearly, play offers many opportunities to facilitate literacy learning. Children develop the cognitive abilities and skills necessary to learn to read and write, in a supportive social setting that connects to children's prior knowledge and experiences. Play also provides opportunities for instruction, modeling, and demonstrating literacy skills and concepts at exactly the moments that children need the information.

The Study

As a kindergarten, first, and second grade teacher, I spent hours, days, and years observing children and became fascinated with the intense intellectual activity during play. This paper discusses a research project that resulted from the formal exploration of questions that emerged as I observed and interacted with children who willingly employed literacy during play. Learning to read and write during play appeared to be a joyful endeavor. Again and again, I witnessed children who were reluctant participants during formal literacy sessions, reading and writing with enthusiasm when literacy supported endeavors of their own choosing. As pressure increased to "buckle down" and improve literacy acquisition, I responded by designing a study to examine and document the value of play, in a rigorous academic environment, as a means for learning to read and write.

Ours is a multi-track, year-round, Title I elementary school, in a southwestern city. We have a school wide bilingual program to enrich the curriculum for all children. Our classroom is characterized by shared power and decision-making. We develop a integrated, play-based curriculum in which we address all of the mandated standards.

In many ways, the 22 children in our class are typical six and seven year olds. They are caring, charming, enthusiastic, excited, exuberant, brilliant, and energetic. They are also curious, quiet, reflective, patient, and thoughtful. Each child embodies unique qualities that contribute to a rich living and learning environment for everyone.

The group is diverse in culture, ethnicity, and social class. Our class includes 17 Hispanic students, two African American, one Native American, and two children are bi-racial (Anglo/Hispanic and African American/Hispanic). Additional diversity characterizes the Hispanic group. Several children are members of families who resided in the community long before this portion of Mexico was annexed by the United States, others are US citizens who are children of immigrants, still others have recently immigrated to the United States with their families. Our class represents groups who have been under-represented in the literature that has served to frame the conceptualization of normal learning, development, and play.

Two of the children are monolingual English speakers, one is a monolingual speaker of Spanish, the rest are in various stages of bilinguality. While socioeconomic status ranges from low-income to middle class, most of the families are characterized as working class. None of the families have members who have attended college; most share the hope that their own children will be the first to have that opportunity.

Literacy and language proficiency and experience varied in our classroom; the children represented a wide range of abilities, experiences and interests. A few children entered first grade with substantial knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principles, and a good amount of experience using text. Others entered with few literate experiences and

knowledge of print. Most of the students were in stages of emergent literacy. All enjoyed picture books and eagerly listened when stories were read aloud.

Our program includes a two-hour block of time each morning, devoted to literacy related activities. Those activities include:

<INSERT TABLE I HERE>

Phonemic awareness and phonics are taught in the context of the activities listed above. In addition, literacy is integrated into all aspects of the curriculum.
along with the more formal lessons and activities, play is an integral part of the existing curriculum. Each day, a period of 30-45 minutes is devoted to "self-selection." During this time students choose from:

<INSERT TABLE II HERE>

The classroom had several distinct areas or centers. All centers were enriched with literacy materials (Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman, & Roskos, 1990; Vukelich, 1991) . The dramatic play area was originally set up in a "house" theme. This area contained a stove, sink, refrigerator, table, shelves, telephones, dress-up clothes, cookbooks, coupons, newspapers, tablets and assorted paper, phone books, assorted writing tools, and children's literature. Prior to the self-selection period the class gathered together in a group meeting area. Together, we read the activity chart, then individual children select an activity and place their name card by the activity listed on the chart.

<INSERT TABLE III HERE>

During the course of the study, other play themes emerged to include library, book club, office, limo, and school. The teacher-created play areas were planned to include materials to promote literacy use. Children who played school in the group meeting area, used literacy materials that were intended for formal curricular activities. When creating their own play scenes, children brought the necessary literacy materials from other areas.

Data Collection

Preparation for the study really began on the first day of school, as I began observing, documenting, and collecting samples from the beginning of our time together. Throughout the school year, anecdotal records were an important component of assessment in our classroom. Observing children and documenting learning, progress, challenges, and interesting events in a notebook were regular activities in my role as the teacher. Since I functioned as a participant observer from the first day of school, the children were accustomed to seeing me taking notes and collecting samples of their work long before the formal data collection began. As a researcher, I continued to document my observations and focused on children reading and writing during play. As a participant observer, I took notes referring to play themes, literacy use, language, and connections to instructional activities.

I began video-recording children in a variety of activities for several weeks prior to formal data collection. In the beginning children were very aware of the camera and many performed, positioned themselves in places where they would be filmed, and made requests, "Teacher, take a picture of me." We spent time talking about the purpose of the video camera and how it works. Children took turns looking through the lense and recording events. In a matter of weeks, the camera seemed to be considered another tool, along with the computer, overhead projector, and listening center. Children no longer commented on it, other than to suggest projects to record. It appeared that behavior was

no longer influenced by the camera as they became accustomed to its presence.

Formal data collection began two months into the school year. As data collection began, I video-recorded children's sociodramatic play, observed that play, taking field notes, and collected samples of child-produced text. Occasionally, I videotaped a panorama of the classroom in order to provide a more complete context of the classroom environment. Video-recording was done during the self-selection period which lasted 30-45 minutes each day, from October through March, except when school was out of session for winter break.

When collecting data the camera was positioned to view the area of dramatic play and the range needed to encompass the play group. Although the sound collected by the video camera was audible and usually adequate for transcribing children's language, when necessary, the sound system was supplemented by audio-recording.

As the classroom teacher, I had access to detailed information regarding context, curriculum, and features of student life in the classroom. As a participant observer, I took notes referring to play themes, literacy use, language, and connections to instructional activities.

Data Analysis

Hubbard and Power (1993) describe the process of analysis as seeing and then seeing again". It is a process by which the mass of data is categorized and reconstructed in order to bring structure and meaning to the whole. As the classroom teacher, I am present and involved during the course of the study. As such, I see and experience the activities of classroom life as it occurs. There are obvious limitations on my ability to take detailed notes during the observation periods. Demands on my attention are many and varied. I am responsible for twenty-two children who are actively involved in various endeavors. Because I am a friend, a resource, and a collaborator, it is often difficult to limit my attention to the focus of the study. Video-tape, which records children's behavior while engaged in sociodramatic play, allows me to "see again" and to observe in detail.

The first-hand observations and video-recordings complement each other. I am able to view short sequences over and over as I transcribe the details of each action and interaction. During the process of transcription, I first viewed the tape focusing on any activities involving literacy. As I watched the tape, I noted each literacy event and described what was happening. The tape was stopped and rewound often, in order to fill in the conversation and activity that occurred immediately before, during and after each event. Detailed description was made regarding the action surrounding the literacy events. The activities that took place between literacy events were described to provide the context and flow of the play. My presence as a participant enables me to experience the events with an awareness and understanding of the children and the context that informs my interpretation of the data.

Data was analyzed according to steps described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in the constant comparative method. The analysis of data began by defining units of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1984) within the data. These units or incidents were the basis for categorizing data into salient themes. As patterns emerged, hypotheses were tested through a process of searching for instances of negative patterns, and searching for alternative explanations.

Literacy events served as the initial units of analysis. Isolating literacy behaviors, activities, and events presents difficulties due to the nature of literacy use as a social activity. Literacy events often occur in the context of other activities, which represent varying roles, purposes, and stages of literacy use. According to Dyson (1993), "a literacy event is an activity engaged in by at least one person (focal child) involving the use of graphic media (print, drawing) for some purpose and viewed by the child as a reading or writing activity" (p. 27). The focal child's event was ended when the child changed the topic or purpose of the activity. For the purposes of analysis, literate behaviors are defined as: (1) reading behaviors which include, conventional reading, pretend or emergent reading, listening to another person read, and looking at print, and (2) writing which includes producing text in the form of scribbling, invented spellings,

and conventional spellings. A literacy event is defined as participation in a literacy activity as defined above. Participation may include reading, writing, or observing.

Initially, literacy events were identified within the play sequence and served as one unit for analysis. The units for analyzing children's writing consisted of each material piece of writing or the description of writing that was not permanent, such as that which was written on the chalkboard, writing that was given away, writing that was noted during observation but to which I did not have access.

Video-tapes were transcribed and literacy events were noted. Video-tapes were first viewed as a whole, in uninterrupted sessions. During this time, I took notes, which described the overall framework and flow of the play. This viewing provided an overall picture of the participants, the duration, and the theme and nature of the play. Following the initial viewing, tapes were viewed in segments of 1-2 minutes. At the end of each 1-2 minute period, the tape was stopped, and I was able to transcribe the specific language and actions of the players. Viewing short segments allowed me to identify literacy events within the play sequences. When I viewed video-tapes and observed literacy events, I noted literacy materials which cued me to be alert for an upcoming literacy event. For example, if a child picked up a book or pencil, I would be prepared to stop the tape when reading or writing would begin. When multiple, ongoing literacy events were identified within a play sequence, each relevant segment of tape was viewed, as many times as necessary, in order to provide a detailed description of the context of each literacy event.

At times, several themes emerged within the umbrella context of "dramatic play." For example, although the initial theme, of one particular play sequence, was "house", as play progressed, children branched off into contexts of "school, mother and baby, and work." These "tributary" play themes presented additional challenges in coding data. Recordings of these complex themes required multiple viewings.

Following the initial "survey" viewing, during which I identified the multiple contexts, I watched the tapes several more times, each time I would focus on only one context, for

example, the school theme, and transcribe in detail the language, action, and literacy that ensued within that particular theme. At times, children crossed from one theme to others as they remained in their play roles, in these cases the actions involving those crossings are reported in multiple transcripts.

Marshall and Rossman (1995) propose that discovering significant categories and the properties, which define those categories, is the most fundamental operation in the analysis of qualitative data. Once literacy events were identified within each setting, each event was categorized as being either an individual or collaborative endeavor. After working with the data for some time, I decided to use Halliday's Seven Functions of Language as the basis for coding categories because the theory fit the data (see Table 3.1). The Seven Functions of Language were chosen because of the influence Halliday has had on the socio-psycholinguistic theory of literacy learning. Halliday contends that literacy functions are extensions of oral language functions, therefore, children use written language to perform functions similar to those identified in oral language. As I reviewed the data, Halliday's theoretical model appeared to be a good fit which would provide a useful framework for defining and analyzing the kinds of literacy uses that were emerging. The next step was to define and categorize each event accordingly.

Findings

This study revealed that children in our class did, indeed, read and write as they played. Their play included many of the activities and conditions that are deemed necessary for literacy learning as they practiced skills and applied literacy concepts that were learned during formal literacy lessons. Literacy was a social event; children wrote text and read books as they interacted with each other. Interactions between the children and me provided an engaging context for explicit instruction.

Engagement and Enjoyment, Developing Literate Identities, Social Interactions, Application and Practice, and Learning emerged from the data as themes that characterized the nature of literate engagement during play in the classroom. Each theme is discussed in the following sections.

Engagement and Enjoyment

"Self-selection, teacher, it's the best part of the day!" Valerie shared with a smile and contented look, as if there was no place else she would rather be. Valerie was playing library. She enacted her role by reading a book while sitting on a cushion in the library area of the classroom. I looked around the classroom and had to agree that this was indeed the best, probably the most productive time of the day. Certainly the happiest. The other players in her library group were busy writing lists and discussing procedures for checking out books. The rest of the class was actively engaged in a variety of activities. Many were reading and writing as the need arose, in the block area, at the computer, making play dough, working with science and math materials. In virtually all settings, oral language flourished as children shared ideas, planned activities and scenarios, negotiated disagreements, asked questions, and listened to each other. That oral communication expanded to include written notes and formal letters.

I asked Valerie what she was reading and made a note of the title, *Tyrone, the Horrible,* in my notebook. She appeared to be engrossed in her reading, but I wondered if it was "pretend" reading. I asked a few questions, "What is it about? Who are the characters? Should I read it to the class? Would she like to read it to the class?" Her responses assured me that she was, indeed reading and comprehending. This brief interchange provided important information about Valerie as a reader. Up to this time, she had selected text that was familiar and easy for her to read. During this play sequence she had suggested a more challenging text, suggesting that she was choosing books because of interest in the content and was confident in her own abilities to read unfamiliar text. She was enjoying reading.

This is one example of the many ways that children seem to enjoy using literacy in their play. By definition, self-selection means that children are able to choose their own activities. Children could choose from block play, art, music, dramatic play, water play, computers, games, science and math activities. It is significant that the children often chose to read and write when presented with so many other possibilities; surely using

literacy was pleasant and rewarding in these contexts. Even when choosing an activity that did not appear to be related to literacy, children frequently used reading and writing as tools in the context of that activity. Many children repeated literacy activities that had been formal lessons, and used those activities as a focus around which to develop narrative themes. For others literacy events were embedded in the context of various sociodramatic play themes, such as house, office, library, or school. As they played, writing was purposeful and . Additionally, engagement in literate activities was often prolonged, children were reluctant to stop their reading and writing tasks. In fact, materials were often gathered and the reading and writing continued through recess.

Valerie's explicitly communicated her enjoyment with her statement about "the best time." Her enjoyment was also evident when I saw her "curled up with a good book," and the enthusiasm with which she discussed the book. Less direct, but equally clear were the smiles, laughter, hugs, and conversation that typified children's behavior as they implemented reading and writing during play.

Social Interactions

In addition to the apparent rewards of implementing reading and writing during play for the children in this study, observations also identified the powerful influence that relationships had on the types and duration of those literate engagements. Socio-dramatic play is characterized by the interaction within shared narrative themes . As they interacted with more knowledgeable users, individuals encountered information that was personally relevant and they were able to practice and internalize concepts and skills.

Children composed and wrote letters to one another, shared information as they read difficult print, assisted with spelling, dictated text to others, shared stories as they read together, and used print to regulate behavior or provide instructions. At times, literacy was used to promote interactions and as a form of communication. At other times, social interactions grew out of shared endeavors involving literacy.

For example, during a book making session Valerie and Noel engaged in rich dialogue,

their smiles and attempts to sustain talk suggest that they enjoyed being together as they made books. They stated their purpose as "making books" and indeed, they did produce pumpkin books, which they proudly displayed. Yet, as they worked, the girls spent a substantial amount of time talking, comparing and sharing ideas, and creating narrative to accompany the school theme that grew out of their work.

Likewise, Audrey, Raymond, and April argued and laughed and hugged and hugged and talked as they played school. The literacy events in that "school" play sequence were not interactive in the sense that children wrote to communicate information, but they shared ideas and knowledge as they located information and helped each other with spellings. They reenacted informational functions that occur in the school context and used each other as resources.

Throughout the study children used print as a means of interaction and as an activity around which to organize interactions. In this context children's interest in each other is an asset for, rather than a detraction from learning. Social interactions served as motivation to read and write and also provided contexts for peer teaching as children with different levels of knowledge and experience learned from each other.

Developing Literate Identities

As I transcribed videotapes and watched children play, I searched for literacy events. Each time I noted a child with books, paper, or pencils I was alerted to the possibility of an upcoming literacy event. Over time, I became increasingly aware of instances of children using literacy materials as props, but not actually following through with a literacy event as defined in this study.

For example, during one session, Adrianna carried a pencil and tablet, walked in high-heeled shoes, and carried a purse on her shoulder. Adrianna was the mother and walked around the play setting, talking to the other players. The session lasted over 30 minutes, during that time Adrianna was not observed doing any kind of actual writing. She had the pencil poised, as if she were ready to write at any time. The writing materials seemed

to be a prop to support her identity as mom. It appears that Adrianna was aware that mothers do write and she was ready.

Observations revealed many instances of children holding or carrying a variety of literacy materials, but not using them to read or write; rather, the materials seemed to be a part of the role. The instances were not tallied as literacy events, there was no beginning or end, there was simply the ongoing possibility that literacy would occur as children participated in other activities.

The idea that children are forming identities and exploring future roles with literacy during play is clearly supported by a conversation with April when she wrote a letter as an university study. April stated that she was "playing university student," but that she will "be a university student" when she gets older.

At times, writing was produced at a stage with reflected a stage of development that had occurred earlier in the child's writing in other contexts. This phenomenon occurred in role play when the child was unfamiliar with functions performed in that role. For example, during library play sequences, Valerie, Nicolette, Noel, and April produced print at a precommunicative stage of development, although each had consistently produced text ranging from Phonemic to Correct stages (Temple, Nathan, & Burris, 1982) in other contexts. It may be that students reverted to a precommunicative stage because they didn't know what the librarian writes, only that she does write. Writing is an aspect of a librarian's identity.

In contrast to the library scene, during school play scenes, the same girls produced text at transition and correct spelling stages. The girls were extremely familiar with the types of writing that I do as the teacher. On a daily basis, they participate in shared readings and writings, and explicit instruction and demonstrations of skills and strategies. When portraying a highly familiar role in which they were also familiar with the type of writing that is produced in that role, they were able to produce text at a high level of accuracy.

Application and Practice

Over the course of observations, children were noted using literacy in ways that included all of Halliday's Seven Function of Oral Language (Halliday, 1973). Children were observed using literacy for: 1) Instrumental 2) Regulatory 3) Interactional 4) Personal 5) Heuristic 6) Imaginative 7) Informative functions. Print served regulatory purposes when children wrote instructions and used environmental print to solve problems, children read for information, wrote to share information, used text as a means of fostering relationships, made requests through notes, lists, and sign-up sheets, wrote to express feelings and ownership, and used print to enhance and represent the imaginary worlds they created during play.

In addition to these classic categories, a new category emerged. Children were observed engaging in sustained reading and writing activities that provided contexts to apply concepts and practice skills that had been introduced during the formal literacy block. Specific scenarios and narrative themes were developed around reenactments of formal lessons and activities. At times, groups of children would reenact entire lessons, with one student taking the role of teacher. At other times, pairs or individuals "played school" and repeated activities including: bookmaking, journal writing, copying letters and words, reading texts form guided and shared reading sessions.

During one play scene in which Deanna and Noel were mother and baby, they spent over 30 minutes reading *Chester*, by Syd Hoff. Both girls were familiar with the story because it had been a selection for read --aloud earlier in the week. Deanna's reading of the book consisted of some word recognition, retelling from memory, and use of pictures for clues. Using these strategies, she was able to reconstruct a rendition of the original text, which retained the original meaning. During the reading engagements, Noel was observed stepping out of her role as baby in order to offer suggestions when Deanna seemed stuck in her reading. At the time, neither Deanna nor Noel was able to recognize all the words in the text independently, but together they were able to read and comprehend the story. When choosing books to read during play, they were noted to

choose text that was familiar, and enabled them to use information and skills gained during formal instruction.

Children practiced literacy skills during multiple readings of familiar books. As members of dramatic play groups, children were observed reading independently and with partners. Observations of children indicate that children utilized knowledge of one to one correspondence, sound-symbol relationships and language patterns, context, and utilized resources to decode and comprehend text. Often, the very books that children read and reread during self-selection were that same books that children chose to read to the class.

Children used play time to practice more technical skills , as well. Nicolette and Valerie spent multiple play sessions practicing handwriting on the chalkboard and on paper. They copied the official handwriting forms and practiced capital and lower case letters. Although handwriting practice is not an activity that is usually associated with play, Nicolette and Valerie spent hours doing just that. As they play school, they chose letters and words to practice, addressing specific skills and concepts that had been addressed during formal lessons. During other play sessions, children spent time making books fashioned after the predictable books that were read and the book making activities that were implemented during formal literacy lessons. They took new knowledge and applied it in their play. And they seemed to enjoy it.

In the informal context of play, students chose to repeat formal activities until they were satisfied with the results. In their play, children created practice sessions that were customized according to the individual child's needs, interests, and abilities.

Learning

Although the focus of this study was not to measure proficiency with print, observing children during play provided many opportunities for children to demonstrate what they know, the hypotheses they are generating, and areas of challenge. Analyses of student

reading behaviors and productions of print during play, indicate that students did, indeed make progress in reading and writing. The children all demonstrated knowledge of alphabetic principle, conventions and functions of print, acquisition of basic sight words, and an appreciation of text as a means of communication. Several children demonstrated strong independent reading and writing abilities. These observations were consistent with formal assessments in the classroom with documented the progress made by each of the participants in literacy development.

Multiple themes and realities framed sociodramatic play during the course of the observations. Children enacted house, school, library, office, limo, van, and family scenarios. Play in these settings included many of the activities and conditions deemed necessary for literacy learning. Children helped one another as they shared literacy events. For example when pairs of children read together, they were often able to read text that was too difficult to tackle alone. When writing, friends supplied sound/symbol connections, found spellings on the word wall and in dictionaries, and made suggestions to facilitate the efforts. I modeled and articulated forms and functions of print, and ways to apply strategies; explicit instruction occurred naturally as I helped children with writing or reading something they needed to further their own activities. In these interactions children were absolutely "on task," paying close attention, and immediately applying the new information.

While specific learning was not assessed, conditions (IRA/NAEYC, 1997) that have been deemed important for developing literacy were identified as characterizing the play environment. Children observed demonstrations and received explicit instruction during meaningful engagements with many kinds of text. Certainly, children spent much time in sustained literate engagements, practicing skills and applying concepts as they collaborated with others and pursued individual interests and challenges.

Discussion

Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1963) suggests that children's interest in each other is an enemy to teaching when we choose not to in include those relationships as components of

learning. The results of this study suggest that play creates a context in which children's interest in each other becomes a powerful motivation for activities related to learning. Play becomes a type of "instructional strategy" in which social interactions provide powerful motivation to read and write. Children learn from each other as they engage in purposeful literacy while developing and relationships with one another.

Play does appear to have an important role in facilitating learning and can be a valuable component in a quality literacy program. When using literacy during activities of their own choosing, children applied the knowledge and practiced the very skills that are taught in the formal curriculum. Because these skills and concepts are also represented in mandates for learning as dictated by school boards and legislatures, this study demonstrates that play need not be a deviation from the curriculum or a "frill" that we can not afford in pursuit of excellence. Play is a context for learning in which coercion or extrinsic motivation become unnecessary. We are able to join children in partnership when we provide opportunities to learn during "the best time of the day."

Play and academic learning are not in conflict. A challenging , formal curriculum is enriched, and learning is reinforced when children are able to integrate new knowledge into their play. Play provides a low risk environment in which children are able to apply concepts and practice skills that are introduced in the formal curriculum. During play sessions children create practice sessions that are customized to individual needs, interests, and abilities. Those rewarding engagements with literacy that occur during play provide opportunities to internalize information and construct personal understandings.

Observations in this study present many examples of opportunities for children to learn about literacy as they play. Children were observed practicing skills related to the formal curriculum, communicating with one another, sharing information, and practicing roles as literate individuals. The children in this study provide compelling evidence that learning to use literacy can be pleasant and rewarding, as demonstrated by the choices made during play. Children consistently chose to read and write when offered a variety of

playful activities. Willingly and enthusiastically, children voluntarily incorporated literacy into self-selected activities and in the context of relationships with others. It appears that learning to read and write can, indeed, be pleasant and rewarding in personally relevant contexts.

Conversely, the content of formal literacy program provides valuable information for enriching play as children incorporate the complexities of literacy use into play scenarios and roles. In addition to the valuable opportunities for developing specific skills and concepts related to literacy, it appears that children need time and opportunities to form identities and explore future roles as literate individuals. Children are aware that reading and writing are necessary behaviors of the adults they pretend to be; play allows them to explore those roles and build upon prior experiences as they apply new knowledge and construct new understandings.

Optimal play experiences require active involvement by the teacher. Play also creates valuable opportunities for the teacher to observe, assess, and evaluate student's understandings and abilities. Anecdotal records and samples of children's writing during play provide important pieces of documentation Data gained during play provides the teacher with important information about provisioning the environment, planning responsive instruction, and engaging in meaningful interactions. Interactions with children allow teachers to scaffold learning through modeling, questioning, and appropriate instruction. These teachable moments are particularly important because they occur in the context of children's purposes and immediate needs.

Clearly, there is enormous potential for play as a context for learning. This study raises several topics for further study. What is the significance of identity formation in the process of becoming literate, and how does that view of self affect attitudes toward reading and writing? Although it is clear that children integrated literate activity throughout their play, how can we assess the learning that occurred during those literate engagements? Children expanded upon and explored aspects of the formal curriculum during their play, is it possible or desirable to quantify the learning that arguably occurred

during those customized practice sessions?

As we become more aware of the opportunities that are created when play is included in the curriculum, concerns also become apparent about the role of the teacher and the professional knowledge needed to create supportive environments and facilitate effectively. In response to those concerns, further research is needed to explore the role of the teacher, attitudes toward play, professional development, and optimal play environments.

In spite of compelling evidence regarding of the benefits of play in facilitating learning, the role of play is noticeably absent in any discussion of school reform In fact, play appears to be losing ground in favor of more structured activities (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, Wardle, 1999). Studies addressing children's activities during play and t the development of academic skills represented in the formal curriculum may yield useful information. In this age of increasing standards and accountability, it is essential to demonstrate that learning does, indeed, occur during play. Studies that focus on assessing student learning in play situations would provide useful documentation to demonstrate student learning during play . This documentation will strengthen arguments for play as a legitimate curricular element.

Demonstrating the vital role of play in learning and fostering achievement is important. For the sake of our children and childhood, it is may be even more important to challenge assumptions about what it is that children should be learning. Notions that good students are passive, and that good teachers control and measure all aspects of student learning in classrooms that are quiet, predictable places may be called into question as we bear witness to the powerful learning and empowerment that result from playful activities.

Finally, vocal advocates for play and child-friendly education are needed to join the policy-making conversations and ensure that play is accepted among educational practices that support and respect children. When we bear witness to the complex learning that takes place when real children have ownership in the process, we may also

be able to challenge narrow definitions of teaching and learning.

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Table 1

Literacy Block Activities

Guided Reading	Shared Reading	Independent/buddy reading
Shared Writing	Guided Writing	Independent Writing
Extension Activities	Skills Activities	Read Aloud

Table 2

Self-Selection Choices

Dramatic Play	Reading	Writing
Listening Center	Puzzles	Games
Block Building	Computer	Art
Science Exploration	Math Activities/Games	

Table 3

Literacy Materials used to Enrich Play Areas

OFFICE

Books/magazines	Telephone	Index cards/box	Checkout cards	Poster
Stamps/pads	Envelopes	Assorted paper	Checkout chart	Stapler
Pens/pencils	Crayons/markers	Calendar	Tape	

HOUSE

Books/magazines	Telephone/book	Cookbooks	Coupons	Play money
Calendars	Scissors	Envelopes	Tape	Stickers
Pencils/pens	Crayons/markers	Tablets	Papers	Date book

LIBRARY

Books/magazines	Telephone/Book	Tablets/Stationary	Notebooks	Paper/Folders
Signs	Calendar	Date book	Stapler	Paper clips
Index cards/box	Computer	Typewriter	Stamps/pads	Play money
Pencils/pens	Scissors	Crayons/markers	Tape	Stickers

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